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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000723

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)
SUBJECT: MALAWI CONGRESS PARTY - THE GEOGRAPHIC CENTER OF
POLITICS

REF: A. LILONGWE 646
[1](#)B. LILONGWE 56

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Classified By: Ambassador Peter Bodde for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Malawi Congress Party (MCP) remains dominant in the Central region of Malawi, but the party is unlikely to attract voters in the South and the North. While party president John Tembo claims he and the party have evolved since his days as the right-hand man of dictator Hastings "Kamuzu" Banda, Tembo remains a typical "big man" who has purged the party leadership of potential rivals. Although selecting a strong vice-presidential candidate from another region would improve the MCP's chances of victory in 2009 polls, Tembo's advanced age makes MCP leadership wary of positioning someone from outside their party to take over. A potential alliance with the United Democratic Front (UDF) that could pair Tembo with a UDF vice-presidential nominee remains a possibility, but only if courts bar former president Bakili Muluzi from standing as a presidential candidate. Comment: Even without an alliance, the MCP is likely, at a minimum, to retain most of its current 54 seats in the National Assembly. Furthermore, higher population growth rates in the Central region have shifted demographics in the MCP's favor, making Tembo the biggest threat to Mutharika's reelection in 2009. End Summary.

Few Changes from the Days of Banda

[1](#)2. (C) The Malawi Congress Party has existed since Malawi's independence in 1964, and was the only legal party in the country from 1966 until 1993. As the party of former dictator, Dr. Hastings "Kamuzu" Banda, its influence diminished with the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994. However, due to stalwart support in the Central region, particularly from members of the Chewa tribe, the party remains politically relevant today. While party president John Tembo claims that he and the MCP have changed (ref A), the former Banda right-hand man remains a prototypical "big man" who does not tolerate challenges to his authority. In his November meeting with the Ambassador, Tembo sought to rebrand himself as a defender of democracy, saying development without rule of law was not acceptable. However, since regaining control of the party in 2003, Tembo has forced out both past and potential rivals, leaving it unclear which leaders might succeed the 76-year-old president.

[1](#)3. (C) On the same day Tembo proudly extolled that the MCP had changed its spots at the party's convention, MCP party spokesman Ishmael Chafukira told emboff that Tembo engineered the surprise ouster of Beston Majoni as Secretary General of the party. Tembo, upon hearing rumors that Majoni intended

to run for the party's presidency, swayed district leaders to vote for a party newcomer with no political experience as its new Secretary General. Up to that point, Majoni was considered one of Tembo's closest advisors and staunchest defenders. He now avoids Tembo except at public events. Tembo claimed to the Ambassador that this change was emblematic of the youthfulness and democracy of the "new" MCP. Not only was Tembo unopposed for the party's presidency, but the MCP slogan was modified to include the new big man: "Banda, Founder of the Nation; Tembo, Leader of the Party."

14. (C) The August death of Respicious Dzanjialimodzi from an allergic reaction to medication also weakened the MCP's leadership ranks. Dzanjialimodzi, the shadow finance minister who was married to Banda's niece, was the most well-respected MCP legislator in the National Assembly and an experienced civil servant. Many believed that Dzanjialimodzi, who came from the same district of Dedza as Tembo, was not only the heir to the MCP throne, but an individual who could appeal to people outside the Central region. His sudden death under unusual circumstances brought back rumors of Tembo's involvement in the 1983 murders of four political rivals in Mwanza. (Comment: Tembo was tried and acquitted of the murders in 1995.) Chafukira commented that the dismissal of Majoni and death of Dzanjialimodzi have left Tembo surrounded by "yes men" precisely at a time when independent thinkers could aid his preparations for his 2009 presidential run.

Strong in the Center, Little Support Elsewhere

15. (C) The MCP continues to have near-fanatical support in the rural areas of Malawi's Central Region. Despite efforts

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to expand its political base since 2005, Chafukira said the party continues to have trouble finding willing parliamentary candidates, much less mounting successful campaigns, beyond its usual base. He expected the MCP to have a chance in only a handful of constituencies outside of the Central region. However, in the center, the party has been overwhelmed with candidates and numerous primaries have devolved into in-fighting. Primary battles are fiercely contested because most candidates believe winning the nomination is akin to winning the parliamentary seat.

Vice-Presidential Predicament

16. (C) The narrow regional base of the MCP is making the selection of a vice-presidential candidate difficult for Tembo. Tradition holds that the VP must hail from a different region than the presidential candidate for the ticket to have a chance. Given Tembo's advanced age, many in the MCP fear putting a strong Southern region candidate such as People's Progressive Movement (PPM) leader Mark Katsonga-Phiri on the ticket as VP. Chafukira said the risk of Tembo dying in office and the resultant shift of power back to the South could outweigh the potential vote gains a strong Southern VP could deliver. Instead, the party hopes to find a more inexperienced politician who would be beholden to the MCP in the event of Tembo's death. However, Chafukira admitted the party had yet to identify such a figure.

UDF Alliance Still a Possibility

17. (C) Some in the MCP still hold out hope of an alliance with former president Bakili Muluzi's United Democratic Front (UDF). Over the past four years, the MCP and UDF have worked well together in a loose coalition to oppose President Mutharika. While we believe there is no way Tembo would agree to run as a vice-presidential candidate to Muluzi, it is possible that another UDF candidate -- not Muluzi -- would

agree to run as Tembo's VP. Both the late Dzanjialimodzi and Atupele Muluzi, son of the former president, confided to emboff that if the courts refuse to allow Muluzi to run for president in 2009, a UDF lieutenant will likely be paired with Tembo on a joint MCP/UDF ticket.

Comment: Tembo - Still A Formidable Foe

18. (C) Comment: Despite it history under Banda's one-party state, the MCP continues to maintain the strongest party organization in the country. It is likely to remain one of the dominant political forces in the country even after John Tembo leaves the scene. The party should capture close to 60 of the 193 parliamentary seats. With no party likely to gain an absolute parliamentary majority, the MCP will be well-positioned to lead a post-election coalition in Parliament. If Muluzi agrees to align with Tembo, the UDF's still significant support in the Southern region could deliver Tembo a majority of the presidential votes. Even without an alliance, Malawi's shifting demographics may favor the MCP. While the South remains the most populous region with 45% of the population, the vote will be divided between Mutharika's DPP and the UDF. The Center meanwhile has grown from 38% of the national population 20 years ago to over 42% today. This growth, combined with limited DPP penetration into the Center and split UDF/DPP loyalties in the South, will make Tembo a formidable foe in the presidential race.

End Comment.

BODDE